

Civil Society and Democratic Governance: An International Legal Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Civil society plays an important role in democratic governance by promoting participation, accountability, and public oversight. This study examines the relationship between civil society and democratic governance through a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. Using the PRISMA 2020 framework, relevant literature published between 2020 and 2025 was systematically reviewed. The findings indicate that civil society strengthens democratic governance by enhancing citizen participation, supporting accountability mechanisms, promoting democratic legitimacy, and contributing to democratic resilience. However, challenges related to shrinking civic space, restrictions on civic freedoms, threats against human rights defenders, and digital governance continue to affect civic engagement. The study concludes that protecting civil society remains essential for sustaining democratic governance.

Keywords: *Civil Society, Democratic Governance, Freedom Of Association, Civic Participation, Accountability, International Law.*

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1. | INTRODUCTION

Civil society plays a fundamental role in democratic governance by facilitating citizen participation, strengthening public accountability, and promoting the protection of democratic values. Democratic systems depend not only on formal political institutions but also on active civic engagement through organizations, associations, advocacy groups, community networks, and social movements. These actors contribute to governance by representing societal interests, monitoring governmental actions, and encouraging public participation in decision-making processes. Consequently, civil society has become an increasingly important subject within democracy studies, governance research, and international law.

The relationship between civil society and democracy has long been recognized as a cornerstone of democratic governance. Civil society provides a space between the state and the market where citizens can organize collectively to pursue common interests and influence public affairs. Through civic engagement, advocacy activities, and public participation, civil society organizations contribute to the responsiveness and legitimacy of governance systems. Sellers, Lidström, and Bae (2020) argue that civil society significantly influences the development and functioning of democratic institutions by strengthening connections between citizens and government. Similarly, Jessop (2020) emphasizes that civil society occupies an important position within governance structures because it facilitates interaction among public institutions, citizens, and other societal actors.

Democratic governance increasingly requires mechanisms that encourage citizen involvement beyond electoral participation. Elections remain essential components of democracy, but contemporary democratic systems also rely upon ongoing engagement through civic organizations, advocacy networks, and public consultation processes. Civil society contributes to this objective by creating opportunities for participation and representation that complement formal political institutions. As a result, civil society functions as an important channel through which citizens can express preferences, influence policy development, and contribute to public decision-making.

The literature consistently identifies civil society participation as a critical element of democratic governance. Mavee (2022) argues that civil society participation strengthens governance by improving accountability, enhancing transparency, and encouraging inclusive decision-making processes. Likewise, Warren (2021) emphasizes that democratic associations contribute to public deliberation and civic engagement by creating spaces where citizens can collectively address public concerns. These findings suggest that civil society organizations play important roles in promoting democratic legitimacy and institutional effectiveness.

Civil society also contributes significantly to democratic accountability. Democratic governance requires oversight mechanisms capable of monitoring governmental actions and ensuring that public institutions remain responsive to

citizens. Civil society organizations frequently perform watchdog functions by evaluating public policies, advocating for transparency, and identifying governance failures. Through these activities, civic actors help strengthen accountability and reduce opportunities for abuses of power. Consequently, civil society has become an important component of contemporary governance systems.

International legal frameworks provide important protections that enable civil society participation and civic engagement. Among the most significant instruments is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which recognizes rights essential to civil society activities. Article 21 protects the right to peaceful assembly, while Article 22 safeguards freedom of association. Together, these provisions establish legal foundations that enable individuals and organizations to participate in public affairs, advocate for social interests, and engage in collective action. These rights are widely regarded as essential conditions for democratic governance and civic participation.

The ICCPR has become one of the most influential international instruments supporting civic freedoms and democratic participation. Joseph (2022) argues that the covenant provides a comprehensive framework protecting civil and political rights necessary for democratic societies. Freedom of association and peaceful assembly enable citizens to organize collectively, express concerns, and participate in governance processes. Without such protections, opportunities for civic engagement and democratic accountability would be significantly restricted.

The protection of civil society is further reinforced through the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The declaration recognizes the important role played by individuals and organizations working to promote and protect human rights. Human rights defenders frequently contribute to democratic governance by advocating for accountability, transparency, and legal protections. The declaration therefore provides additional international support for civic engagement and public participation. These protections are increasingly important as civil society actors encounter challenges associated with political restrictions and shrinking civic space.

Recent scholarship highlights growing concerns regarding the protection of civic freedoms and civil society participation. Around the world, civil society organizations have faced restrictions affecting freedom of association, public assembly, advocacy activities, and civic engagement. Uerpman-Witzack (2022) argues that shrinking civic space represents a significant challenge because restrictions on association rights weaken democratic participation and accountability mechanisms. Similarly, Kiai and Kaguongo (2023) emphasize that obstacles affecting peaceful assembly and civic engagement can reduce opportunities for public participation and democratic oversight. These developments suggest that protecting civic freedoms remains an important governance objective.

Civil society also contributes to democratic resilience. Democratic systems increasingly face challenges associated with authoritarian tendencies, political

polarization, and democratic backsliding. Civil society organizations often serve as defenders of democratic values by promoting accountability, protecting civic freedoms, and encouraging citizen participation. Bernhard, Hicken, Reenock, and Lindberg (2020) argue that active civil societies can discourage democratic defection and strengthen democratic stability. Likewise, Merkel and Lührmann (2021) emphasize that resilient democracies frequently depend upon strong civic institutions capable of responding to illiberal and authoritarian pressures.

Technological developments have further transformed civil society participation. Digital platforms and social media have expanded opportunities for civic engagement by enabling advocacy campaigns, information sharing, and collective action. Suwana (2020) demonstrates that digital activism can mobilize public participation and strengthen civic engagement in democratic processes. These developments indicate that civil society increasingly operates within both physical and digital spaces, creating new opportunities and challenges for democratic governance.

Despite extensive research concerning democracy, participation, and governance, many studies focus on specific dimensions of civil society rather than examining its broader relationship with democratic governance through an international legal perspective. Furthermore, contemporary challenges involving shrinking civic space, digital activism, democratic backsliding, and the protection of civic freedoms continue to reshape the role of civil society within democratic systems. Consequently, there remains a need for systematic research examining how international legal frameworks support civil society participation and democratic governance.

In response to this gap, this study employs a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the relationship between civil society and democratic governance from an international legal perspective. The analysis focuses on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders as key frameworks supporting civic participation, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, and democratic accountability. By synthesizing contemporary scholarship concerning civil society, civic engagement, democratic legitimacy, accountability, and democratic resilience, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how civil society contributes to democratic governance in contemporary societies.

2. | LITERATURE REVIEW

Civil Society and Democratic Governance

Civil society is widely regarded as an essential component of democratic governance because it creates opportunities for citizen participation, public deliberation, and accountability. Civil society consists of organizations, associations, advocacy groups, and community networks that operate independently from the state while engaging in public affairs. These actors contribute to democracy by representing

social interests, promoting participation, and strengthening relationships between citizens and government institutions.

The relationship between civil society and democracy is based on the principle that governance should involve active citizen engagement beyond electoral participation. Democratic systems require mechanisms that allow citizens to express concerns, advocate for policy change, and influence public decision-making. Civil society organizations provide such mechanisms by facilitating collective action and public dialogue. Sellers, Lidström, and Bae (2020) argue that civil society strengthens democratic governance by connecting citizens with political institutions and improving responsiveness. Similarly, Jessop (2020) emphasizes that civil society functions as an important governance arena where public interests can be articulated and negotiated.

The literature consistently highlights the contribution of civil society to democratic legitimacy. Mavee (2022) argues that civic participation improves governance by encouraging transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability. Likewise, Warren (2021) notes that associations create opportunities for citizens to engage in public discussion and collective problem-solving. Through these functions, civil society helps strengthen public trust and institutional legitimacy.

Civil society also contributes to governance effectiveness by providing oversight and monitoring functions. Civic organizations frequently evaluate governmental performance, advocate for policy reforms, and encourage transparency. These activities improve accountability by ensuring that public institutions remain responsive to societal needs. Consequently, civil society is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic governance and participatory democracy.

International Legal Frameworks for Civil Society Participation

International legal frameworks provide essential protections that enable civil society organizations and citizens to participate in democratic governance. Among the most important instruments is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which safeguards civic freedoms necessary for public participation and collective action.

Article 21 of the ICCPR protects the right to peaceful assembly, while Article 22 guarantees freedom of association. These rights enable individuals to organize collectively, advocate for public interests, and participate in governance processes. Joseph (2022) argues that the ICCPR provides one of the strongest international legal foundations for democratic participation and civic engagement. Freedom of assembly and association allow citizens to contribute to public affairs and hold governments accountable.

The importance of these rights extends beyond individual freedoms. Civic organizations, social movements, and advocacy groups rely upon assembly and association rights to operate effectively. Sankaran (2024) emphasizes that freedom of association remains essential for democratic participation because it enables citizens to organize collectively around shared concerns. Similarly, Weber (2024) highlights that

assembly and association rights are fundamental components of democratic constitutional systems.

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders further strengthens protections for civic actors. The declaration recognizes the important role of individuals and organizations working to promote human rights, accountability, and public participation. Human rights defenders often act as intermediaries between citizens and institutions by monitoring governance practices and advocating for reform.

Together, the ICCPR and the Human Rights Defenders Declaration provide legal foundations supporting civil society participation, democratic accountability, and governance legitimacy. These frameworks demonstrate international recognition that civic freedoms are essential for democratic governance.

Civil Society and Public Accountability

Civil society plays a significant role in strengthening public accountability within democratic governance systems. Accountability requires public institutions to explain and justify their actions while remaining responsive to citizens' needs and expectations. Civil society organizations contribute to this process by monitoring governmental activities, advocating for transparency, and promoting public oversight. Through these functions, civic actors help ensure that public authority is exercised responsibly and in accordance with democratic principles.

The literature consistently identifies civil society as an important accountability mechanism. Bernhard, Hicken, Reenock, and Lindberg (2020) argue that active civil societies help deter democratic erosion by increasing oversight and strengthening public scrutiny of governmental actions. Civic organizations often act as watchdogs that identify governance failures, expose misconduct, and encourage institutional reforms. These activities contribute to democratic accountability by improving transparency and responsiveness.

Civil society also supports accountability through advocacy and public engagement. Organizations frequently represent marginalized groups, communicate public concerns, and encourage citizen involvement in governance processes. León-Reyes (2023) emphasizes that civil society contributes to accountability by creating additional channels through which citizens can monitor public institutions and demand corrective action. Similarly, Birchall (2020) highlights the role of civil society actors in promoting accountability across both public and private sectors.

Transparency represents another important area where civil society contributes to accountability. Civic organizations often campaign for information disclosure, open government initiatives, and public access to decision-making processes. These efforts strengthen democratic governance by reducing information asymmetries between governments and citizens. As a result, civil society functions as an essential partner in promoting accountable and transparent governance.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that civil society strengthens public accountability through oversight, advocacy, transparency promotion, and citizen engagement. These functions contribute directly to democratic governance by ensuring that institutions remain responsive to public interests.

Civic Participation and Democratic Legitimacy

Civic participation is a fundamental element of democratic governance because it enables citizens to influence public affairs and contribute to policy development. Democratic legitimacy depends not only on elections but also on meaningful opportunities for ongoing public engagement. Civil society organizations play a critical role in facilitating participation by providing channels through which citizens can express opinions, advocate for interests, and engage with governance processes.

The literature emphasizes that participation strengthens democratic legitimacy by increasing public involvement in decision-making. Zakhour (2020) argues that public participation enhances legitimacy because citizens are more likely to support governance outcomes when they have opportunities to contribute to deliberative processes. Likewise, Dvoskin (2022) highlights that civil society participation can address democratic deficits by expanding representation beyond formal electoral mechanisms.

Civil society organizations also contribute to political inclusion. Through advocacy, community engagement, and public education activities, civic actors help broaden participation opportunities for diverse groups within society. These efforts strengthen democratic governance by ensuring that public policies reflect a wider range of perspectives and interests. Consequently, civil society contributes to more inclusive and representative governance systems.

Public trust represents another important dimension of democratic legitimacy. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions when governance processes are transparent, participatory, and responsive. Civil society contributes to trust-building by facilitating communication between citizens and public institutions while encouraging accountability and openness. Egholm, Heyse, and Mourey (2020) argue that civil society organizations frequently act as promoters of the common good by encouraging civic engagement and public responsibility.

Overall, civic participation and democratic legitimacy are closely interconnected. Civil society strengthens legitimacy by promoting inclusion, representation, participation, and public trust. These contributions help reinforce democratic governance and improve institutional responsiveness.

Emerging Challenges for Civil Society

Despite its important contributions to democratic governance, civil society increasingly faces challenges that affect its ability to participate in public affairs, promote accountability, and protect democratic values. Contemporary governance environments are characterized by political polarization, democratic backsliding, restrictions on civic freedoms, and rapid technological change. These developments

have created new obstacles for civil society organizations and civic actors across many democratic and non-democratic contexts.

One of the most significant challenges concerns the shrinking of civic space. Civic space refers to the legal, political, and social environment that enables individuals and organizations to exercise freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. Uerpmann-Wittzack (2022) argues that restrictions on civic freedoms weaken democratic governance by limiting opportunities for citizen participation and public oversight. Similarly, Strachwitz and Toepler (2022) emphasize that civic spaces are increasingly contested, even within established democracies, creating challenges for civil society organizations and advocacy groups.

The literature also highlights the relationship between shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding. Lorch (2021) demonstrates that restrictions on civil society often accompany broader declines in democratic quality and institutional accountability. Likewise, Pospieszna and Pietrzyk-Reeves (2022) show that civil society organizations frequently face difficulties maintaining democratic engagement when governments impose legal, political, or administrative constraints on civic activities. These findings suggest that protecting civic freedoms remains essential for preserving democratic governance.

Another important challenge concerns the safety and protection of human rights defenders. Civil society actors who advocate for accountability, transparency, and human rights may face harassment, intimidation, or violence. Bakke, Mitchell, and Smidt (2020) argue that state actions against human rights defenders can weaken civic participation and reduce democratic oversight. Similarly, Krain, Murdie, and Beard (2024) highlight continuing threats faced by human rights defenders in various political contexts. These developments demonstrate the importance of international legal protections supporting civic engagement and advocacy.

Digital transformation has created both opportunities and challenges for civil society participation. Digital platforms enable organizations to mobilize support, disseminate information, and engage citizens more efficiently than traditional methods. Suwana (2020) demonstrates that digital activism can strengthen civic engagement by facilitating collective action and public participation. However, digital environments also create risks associated with misinformation, online harassment, surveillance, and unequal access to technology. Consequently, digital participation requires governance frameworks capable of protecting civic freedoms while addressing technological risks.

Democratic resilience has emerged as another important theme within civil society research. Democratic resilience refers to the ability of democratic systems to withstand political pressures while maintaining democratic principles and institutional effectiveness. Merkel and Lührmann (2021) argue that strong civil societies contribute significantly to democratic resilience because they strengthen accountability, encourage participation, and defend democratic norms. Civil society organizations therefore play

important roles in responding to authoritarian tendencies and protecting democratic institutions.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that civil society faces significant contemporary challenges involving shrinking civic space, restrictions on civic freedoms, threats to human rights defenders, digital governance risks, and democratic backsliding. Nevertheless, civil society continues to serve as an important source of democratic resilience by promoting accountability, participation, and civic engagement. These findings suggest that protecting civic freedoms remains essential for sustaining democratic governance in contemporary societies.

3. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the relationship between civil society and democratic governance from an international legal perspective. The study focuses on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), particularly Articles 21 and 22 concerning freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, as well as the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. These international frameworks provide legal foundations supporting civic participation, public accountability, and democratic engagement.

The review follows the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure transparency and methodological consistency throughout the research process. According to Page et al. (2021), PRISMA provides systematic procedures for identifying, screening, evaluating, and selecting relevant literature. The review process consisted of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. These stages were conducted to ensure that only studies directly related to civil society, democratic governance, civic participation, accountability, democratic legitimacy, civic freedoms, and democratic resilience were included in the analysis.

Literature was collected from major academic databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, JSTOR, and governance-related publications. Searches employed combinations of keywords such as civil society, democratic governance, civic participation, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, democratic legitimacy, accountability, human rights defenders, civic space, digital activism, and democratic resilience. Additional searches focused specifically on ICCPR Articles 21 and 22 and international protections for civil society actors.

The inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, governance studies, democracy research, legal analyses, and policy publications published primarily between 2020 and 2025. Studies were included when they addressed civil society participation, democratic governance, accountability, civic engagement, civic freedoms, democratic resilience, or related international legal

frameworks. Duplicate records, non-scholarly publications, and studies lacking direct relevance to the research objectives were excluded during the screening process.

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic synthesis. Findings were organized into five thematic categories: civil society and democratic governance, international legal frameworks for civil society participation, civil society and public accountability, civic participation and democratic legitimacy, and emerging challenges for civil society. These themes reflect the principal dimensions through which civil society contributes to democratic governance and institutional legitimacy.

The analytical framework adopted in this study conceptualizes civil society as a governance actor that strengthens democratic systems through participation, accountability, representation, and public oversight. International legal frameworks are examined as normative foundations supporting civic freedoms and participation rights. Through the integration of systematic literature review methods and international legal analysis, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how civil society contributes to democratic governance in contemporary societies.

4. | RESULTS

The findings of this study demonstrate that civil society contributes significantly to democratic governance by strengthening citizen participation, public accountability, democratic legitimacy, and institutional resilience. The reviewed literature consistently indicates that democratic systems benefit from active civic engagement because civil society organizations provide mechanisms through which citizens can participate in governance processes, monitor public institutions, and advocate for public interests. International legal frameworks, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, provide important protections supporting these functions.

One of the principal findings concerns the role of civil society as a facilitator of democratic participation. Civil society organizations create opportunities for citizens to engage in public affairs beyond formal electoral processes. Through advocacy activities, community engagement, public consultations, and civic initiatives, these organizations strengthen democratic responsiveness and encourage broader participation in governance. Sellers, Lidström, and Bae (2020) argue that civil society serves as an important intermediary between citizens and public institutions, helping to improve communication and representation. These findings suggest that civil society strengthens democracy by expanding opportunities for citizen engagement.

The analysis further indicates that civil society contributes to democratic legitimacy. Democratic governance depends upon public confidence in institutions and opportunities for meaningful participation. Civil society organizations help improve legitimacy by representing diverse interests and encouraging inclusive governance processes. Mavee (2022) emphasizes that civic participation strengthens governance legitimacy because citizens are more likely to support public institutions when they

have opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes. Similarly, Zakhour (2020) argues that public participation enhances legitimacy by improving acceptance of governance outcomes. These findings demonstrate that civil society contributes directly to democratic legitimacy and institutional trust.

Another important finding concerns the role of civil society in promoting public accountability. Civil society organizations frequently perform oversight functions by monitoring governmental performance, advocating for transparency, and identifying governance shortcomings. Through these activities, civic actors strengthen accountability and encourage public institutions to remain responsive to citizens. Bernhard, Hicken, Reenock, and Lindberg (2020) argue that active civil societies reduce the likelihood of democratic erosion by increasing public scrutiny of governmental actions. Likewise, Birchall (2020) highlights the contribution of civil society to accountability through advocacy and monitoring activities. These findings indicate that civil society functions as an important accountability mechanism within democratic systems.

The findings also demonstrate that international legal frameworks provide essential foundations for civil society participation. The ICCPR establishes protections for freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association through Articles 21 and 22. These rights enable citizens to organize collectively, advocate for public interests, and participate in governance processes. Joseph (2022) emphasizes that the ICCPR provides a comprehensive legal framework supporting civic freedoms necessary for democratic governance. Similarly, Weber (2024) notes that assembly and association rights are fundamental democratic protections that facilitate civic engagement and public participation.

The literature further indicates that freedom of association remains particularly important for democratic governance. Civic organizations depend upon the ability to organize, mobilize resources, and engage in collective activities without undue restrictions. Sankaran (2024) argues that freedom of association enables citizens to participate effectively in public affairs and contribute to democratic accountability. These findings suggest that legal protections supporting civic organizations remain essential for sustaining democratic governance.

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders emerged as another important framework supporting civil society participation. The declaration recognizes the role of individuals and organizations that promote accountability, transparency, and human rights protection. Human rights defenders often serve as watchdogs by monitoring governmental actions and advocating for legal reforms. The findings indicate that international recognition of these roles contributes to stronger protections for civic engagement and democratic participation.

Another significant finding concerns the relationship between civil society and democratic resilience. Democratic systems increasingly face challenges associated with political polarization, authoritarian tendencies, and democratic backsliding. Civil

society organizations contribute to resilience by promoting democratic values, protecting civic freedoms, and encouraging citizen engagement. Merkel and Lührmann (2021) argue that resilient democracies frequently depend upon strong civic institutions capable of responding to anti-democratic pressures. Similarly, Hegre, Bernhard, and Teorell (2020) emphasize that active civil societies contribute to stable and peaceful democratic environments. These findings indicate that civil society strengthens the capacity of democratic systems to withstand political challenges.

The review also highlights emerging challenges affecting civil society participation. One of the most frequently identified issues concerns shrinking civic space. Restrictions on association rights, assembly rights, and civic activities can reduce opportunities for participation and weaken accountability mechanisms. Uerpmann-Witzack (2022) argues that shrinking civic space limits democratic engagement and undermines governance quality. Likewise, Lorch (2021) demonstrates that restrictions affecting civil society frequently accompany broader patterns of democratic decline. These findings suggest that protecting civic freedoms remains an important governance objective.

Threats against human rights defenders represent another significant challenge identified in the literature. Bakke, Mitchell, and Smidt (2020) argue that actions targeting civic activists can weaken accountability mechanisms and reduce opportunities for public participation. Similarly, Krain, Murdie, and Beard (2024) identify continuing risks faced by human rights defenders across various political contexts. These findings indicate that legal protections supporting civic actors remain essential for democratic governance.

Digital activism emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge for contemporary civil society. Digital technologies enable organizations to mobilize support, disseminate information, and engage citizens more efficiently. Suwana (2020) demonstrates that digital activism can strengthen civic participation by facilitating collective action and public engagement. However, digital environments also create risks associated with misinformation, online harassment, and unequal access to technology. These findings suggest that digital governance frameworks must balance opportunities for participation with protections against emerging risks.

The findings additionally indicate that civil society contributes to public trust and governance responsiveness. Civic organizations often serve as intermediaries between citizens and institutions, helping governments understand public concerns while providing citizens with opportunities to engage in governance processes. Egholm, Heyse, and Mourey (2020) argue that civil society organizations frequently promote the common good by encouraging public participation and civic responsibility. These functions strengthen governance legitimacy and improve institutional responsiveness.

Overall, the evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that civil society constitutes an essential component of democratic governance. Through participation, accountability, representation, oversight, and advocacy, civil society strengthens

democratic legitimacy and institutional effectiveness. International legal frameworks provide important protections supporting these activities, while contemporary challenges such as shrinking civic space and democratic backsliding highlight the continuing importance of safeguarding civic freedoms. These findings indicate that strong civil societies remain critical for sustaining democratic governance and democratic resilience.

5. | DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that civil society remains a fundamental pillar of democratic governance because it strengthens participation, accountability, legitimacy, and democratic resilience. The reviewed literature consistently shows that democratic institutions function more effectively when citizens are able to organize collectively, participate in public affairs, and engage in oversight activities through civil society organizations. These findings support the view that democratic governance extends beyond formal political institutions and requires active civic engagement supported by legal protections and participatory mechanisms.

One of the most significant findings concerns the contribution of civil society to democratic participation. Democratic governance depends on citizens having opportunities to express interests, influence policy decisions, and engage in public deliberation. Civil society organizations facilitate these processes by providing channels through which individuals can collectively participate in governance. The findings suggest that civil society complements representative institutions by creating additional opportunities for engagement and representation. As a result, civic participation strengthens democratic responsiveness and improves the connection between governments and citizens.

The study further highlights the importance of civil society for democratic legitimacy. Legitimacy depends not only on electoral procedures but also on public confidence that governance processes are inclusive and responsive. Civil society contributes to legitimacy by representing diverse interests, promoting participation, and encouraging dialogue between institutions and citizens. When civic actors are actively involved in governance processes, public institutions are more likely to be perceived as accountable and representative. Consequently, civil society serves as an important source of democratic legitimacy.

Another important implication concerns accountability. The findings demonstrate that civil society organizations perform oversight functions that strengthen transparency and public accountability. Through advocacy, monitoring activities, and public engagement, civic actors encourage governments to justify decisions and remain responsive to public concerns. These functions reduce opportunities for abuses of power while promoting more transparent governance practices. Therefore, civil society should be viewed as an essential accountability mechanism within democratic systems.

The analysis also confirms the importance of international legal frameworks in supporting civic participation. The ICCPR provides legal protections for freedom of

association and peaceful assembly, while the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders reinforces protections for individuals and organizations engaged in public advocacy. These frameworks establish normative standards that enable civil society actors to participate in governance processes without undue interference. The findings therefore suggest that international law plays an important role in safeguarding democratic participation and accountability.

The study additionally demonstrates that civil society contributes to democratic resilience. Contemporary democracies face increasing challenges associated with political polarization, democratic backsliding, and authoritarian pressures. Strong civil societies can help counter these challenges by defending democratic norms, promoting accountability, and encouraging citizen engagement. Civic organizations often act as early warning mechanisms that identify threats to democratic governance and mobilize public responses. Consequently, civil society contributes not only to democratic functioning but also to democratic stability.

At the same time, the findings reveal several challenges affecting civil society participation. Shrinking civic space remains one of the most significant concerns because restrictions on association, assembly, and advocacy can weaken democratic governance. Limitations on civic freedoms reduce opportunities for participation and diminish accountability mechanisms. These developments suggest that protecting civic space remains essential for maintaining democratic governance and institutional legitimacy.

Digital transformation presents both opportunities and challenges for civil society. Digital technologies enable organizations to communicate more effectively, mobilize supporters, and expand participation opportunities. However, digital environments also create concerns related to misinformation, surveillance, online harassment, and unequal access to technology. The findings indicate that digital participation can strengthen democratic engagement when supported by governance frameworks that protect civic freedoms and information integrity.

The findings further emphasize the importance of protecting human rights defenders and civic activists. Individuals and organizations engaged in accountability and advocacy activities often face risks that may limit their ability to participate effectively in public affairs. Strengthening legal protections for civic actors is therefore important for preserving democratic participation and public oversight. Effective democratic governance requires environments where citizens can engage freely without fear of intimidation or retaliation.

Overall, the study demonstrates that civil society contributes significantly to democratic governance through participation, accountability, legitimacy, and resilience. International legal frameworks provide essential protections supporting these functions, while contemporary challenges highlight the continuing need to safeguard civic freedoms. Strengthening civil society participation therefore remains

an important strategy for promoting democratic governance and institutional effectiveness.

5. | CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between civil society and democratic governance through a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. The findings demonstrate that civil society plays a vital role in strengthening democratic governance by promoting participation, accountability, legitimacy, and democratic resilience.

The study found that civil society organizations contribute to democratic governance by facilitating citizen engagement, representing societal interests, and monitoring public institutions. Through these functions, civic actors strengthen transparency, accountability, and public trust. International legal frameworks further support these contributions by protecting freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and civic participation.

The findings also indicate that civil society enhances democratic resilience by promoting democratic values and responding to governance challenges. However, shrinking civic space, restrictions on civic freedoms, threats against human rights defenders, and challenges associated with digital governance continue to affect civil society participation in many contexts.

Overall, the study concludes that civil society remains an essential component of democratic governance. Protecting civic freedoms, strengthening participation opportunities, and supporting accountability mechanisms are critical for sustaining democratic legitimacy, institutional responsiveness, and democratic resilience in contemporary societies.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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